

The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991

Review Number:

28

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 March, 1997

Author:

Eric J. Hobsbawm

ISBN:

9780718133078

Date of Publication:

1994

Pages:

640pp.

Publisher:

Michael Joseph

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Lawrence Freedman

Eric Hobsbawm has written a book which has been rightly acclaimed as setting the standard for accounts of the Twentieth Century. We can expect such books to proliferate as we approach the end of the millennium. Few will be able to match the powerful analysis and broad sweep of this book. Others may display more mastery of the specialist historical literature (into which, Hobsbawm acknowledges, he has only dipped) but they will be hard put to address so confidently all the great issues that have occupied intellectual talents over the century, taking in the arts and sciences as readily as economics and politics. Hobsbawm is best approached as much as a political theorist as an historian.

For Hobsbawm the Age of Extremes follows those of Revolution, Capitalism and Empire on which he has already written at length and with great distinction. This age is further subdivided into 'The Age of Catastrophe' (1914-50), 'The Golden Age' (1950-75), and 'The Landslide' (1975 to 1991 and beyond). Neither the periodization nor the labelling are particularly felicitous. Hobsbawm has confined himself to the 'short Twentieth Century' marked by the start of the first world war and concluding with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990's. In practice he allows his analysis to move on beyond 1991 and he is well aware of the political forces that need to be understood if 1914 is to be explained. Neither 1950 nor 1975 are obvious punctuation points. While the economic growth between these two points might just be termed 'golden', if not for all, it is hardly convincing to describe the period since 1975 as a 'landslide', as if things have been rolling steadily down hill since that point. Such an image does not do justice to a much more complex picture.

It is only from a very particular perspective that the last quarter of this century appears as a significant retreat on the third. Hobsbawm has such a perspective. This is in part because he was born three years into his period, and thankfully still survives it. His narrative is sprinkled (although not liberally) with occasional reminiscences. More important is the fact that ideologically speaking, Hobsbawm backed the losing side. He

was an active communist for many years and remains notoriously unrepentant. To be sure, he accepts that communism failed to deliver the goods, but capitalism only survived by the skin of its teeth. When communism seemed full of promise, capitalism had to learn to revise itself in order to escape the depression. During the first decades of the cold war the two systems played a sort of score draw, with the competition obliging them both to raise their economic game. While communism faltered, Hobsbawm appears to be saying, capitalism too lost its bearings. Completing this book in the immediate post-cold-war period, he sensed a prospect not of the triumph of democratic capitalism, but a form of anarchy, incapable of producing the conditions for a healthy environment and social stability.

The book opens with a sample of twelve observations on the century, which produce a contrast between its massacres and wars, and the leaps forward in science and technology, between the nobility of the cherished ideals that have inspired so many people to attempt to create a better world, and the persistence of the forces of unreason and irrationality that have continued to thwart them. A century which includes two world wars, Stalinism and the holocaust, not to mention numerous other acts of genocide and oppression, deserves the extremist label. However, whether this remain an age of extremism is less clear, and represents the large question raised by Hobsbawm.

He assumes that capitalism is such an unruly force that it is inherently extremist if allowed to operate unchecked, and this is what he fears has now been allowed to happen as a result of the failure of socialism to sustain itself and develop as a credible model. Socialism, in all its guises, helped identify a role for the state in the management of human affairs. Without this guidance, market forces will continue to wreak ecological and social havoc and will not be subjected to responsible human direction.

Such a gloomy analysis flows naturally from the progressive political tradition, to which Hobsbawm remains attached. Part of this is a disdain for the leading capitalist state, the United States, which is treated unsympathetically throughout, leading to an inadequate grasp of why the 'American way' continues to have such an impact. A more fundamental aspect of this tradition is the view of the state as the natural focus for analytical attention and the best hope for improving the human condition, for reconstructing economic activity in the name of a more just society. The course of enlightened change depended on gaining control of the instruments of coercion and hegemony: without these no political struggle could be won.

The experience of the Twentieth Century has undermined confidence in the state, and this has reinforced the contrary philosophy of liberal individualism against which Hobsbawm wishes to argue. To those of this contrary persuasion, not only has the state's potential for good hardly been fully realised, but also that economic growth has come in spite of the state. Certainly we have been left in no doubt of the malign role of the state when its means of violence are turned against its own people, or against another, equally endowed state, in a cataclysmic war.

The modern state was a product of the ever-increasing demands of warfare - building up the population and industrial capacity, to provide ever more men and materiel for the battlefield, improving science and technology to ensure a steady stream of new types of weapons, refining the broadcasting and print media to generate popular support. Even the early stirrings of the welfare state were prompted by the need for a healthier and better motivated army. What progressive theorists hoped was that the mobilization and directional capacities of the state, as demonstrated in two world wars, could be redirected to more positive purposes.

The most substantial attempt to demonstrate just what might be achieved by a determined political elite in full command of the state apparatus, came once the Bolsheviki established themselves in Russia after the revolution in 1917. Communist rule had its achievements. It took Russia through civil war and famine and then a bitter, bloody war with the Nazis. It raised living standards and introduced heavy industry. Yet the achievements came at an enormous cost. Whether or not the Great Terror was an inevitable consequence of a vanguard party, a proposition Hobsbawm dismisses, it certainly provided the opportunity for Stalin.

The problem for communist theorists for the four decades after the Russian revolution was to provide an

historical rationalization for the use of oppressive means to advance the needs of the people; the problem for them in more recent decades has been to explain why the needs of the people were still not being advanced and how the Soviet system fell into cynicism, stagnation and eventual collapse. When the people got their chance to give a verdict on communism it was thumbs down. In August 1991, virtually at the end of Hobsbawm's period, the Old Guard in the Kremlin proved that they could no longer even organize a decent coup. To add salt to the Soviet wound, if people had acquired any ideological conviction over the years of communist rule it was of the innate superiority of capitalism as an economic system.

While it was undoubtedly the case that capitalism got through its mid-century crises through judicious state intervention, it seems to have prospered over the last couple of decades through the steady weakening of state controls. Erstwhile social democrat parties have come to respect if not yet quite love the free market. The most formidable opponents of capitalism are now to be found among precisely those elements against which socialists once recoiled in horror - romantic nationalists and religious fundamentalists, both in their own ways seeking to preserve spiritual values in the face of a materialist onslaught.

Hobsbawm fears a free-market capitalism that no longer faces a stiff ideological challenge from the left (or the right) and is thus under no obligation to control its excesses. Writing just a few years after the end of the cold war he captures much of the post-euphoric mood. Having rejoiced at the end of the cold war and the liberation of societies from the communist grip people were startled at the costs of the transition from socialism to capitalism (one for which few theorists had prepared us) and the apparently sudden outbreak of ethnic violence and, in the case of the Gulf, even old-fashioned warfare.

A few years on things look a little calmer and Hobsbawm's gloom seems overdone. Of course, events in Russia remain critical and the potential for a sudden lurch into darkness remains. Given the existence of so many nuclear weapons, though the arsenals are being reduced and withdrawn from the front-line) it is hard ever to feel completely secure. Attempts to assert the primacy of political will over economic development, especially in the drive towards economic and monetary union in Europe, look distinctly shaky, and there is now an increasing acceptance, grudging in some cases but enthusiastic in others, that global communications and markets have reduced the capacity of government to shape the economic destinies of their people, even while they have increased the capacities of individuals.

Perhaps the real difficulty is that the new political agenda, appropriate for the next millennium, remains curiously unformed. The state is not withering away, and there remains no better vehicle for controlling organized violence or expressing the character and the concerns of a particular society, but the nature of its competence in the economic sphere and its tolerable intrusion into civil society are being redefined. This process seems to be more the consequence of a series of small decisions than the product of a clear political programme. Great powers no longer expect to fight each other, dominate international affairs, or aggrandize themselves at the expense of others, but the corollary of this is that they are not sure as to the range of their interests and responsibilities in the pursuit of a wider peace and stability. Multilateral organizations have yet to show themselves to be able to cope with those global problems that cannot be handled at the level of the state, and the implications of new forms of institutional arrangements are uncertain.

Hobsbawm is wary of liberal triumphalism. He will never be convinced that unconstrained free enterprise can work to the common good, and he comprehends the distinctiveness of individual cultures and political systems sufficiently to know that, even if liberal capitalism was a recipe for a good society, not all can mix together the right ingredients in the right mixture at the right time. Nonetheless, while liberalism may not yet work as a universal ideology it is the great survivor of the Twentieth Century. It continues to show how enterprise can be rewarded, authoritarianism subverted and cultural experiments can continue.

It is hard to celebrate a century which has seen so much misery and tragedy imposed in the name of failed ideologies. This book exudes an added melancholy because Hobsbawm came late to appreciating the shortcomings of one of these ideologies and has yet to appreciate the quality of the one ideology that has shown itself thus far to be best able to reflect human aspirations and adapt to changing circumstances.

Other reviews:

First Things

<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9511/reviews/bacevich.html> [2]

Danny Reviews

http://dannyreviews.com/h/Age_Extremes.html [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/28#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/266>

[2] <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9511/reviews/bacevich.html>

[3] http://dannyreviews.com/h/Age_Extremes.html